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Towards a New Gaze
Thoughts on Tourist Photography in India

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Note

Accompanying this text is a series of photos taken during a one month trip in south India and Kolkata in December 2012-January 2013. These pictures are the result of a longer thought process regarding ethical photography as I personally see it, brought on by a sudden interest in postcolonialism and modern India. They are an attempt to produce a body of work that in its essence is nothing more or less than personal tourist photos of mine: photos (often snapshots) that made me feel pleased and simultaneously unintrusive while taking them. Many of the pictures can be criticized for including an aspect of exoticizing; it was however my conscious intention to exoticize everyday details that are possible to find globally in one way or another, as opposed to exoticizing the India or the cultures I encountered or reducing them to something simple.

The strange stick on the ground. The names carved into trunks of trees. The morning sun drenching the landscape in a veil of soft and strange color. These are all universal things, but also things that one sees more easily in a new environment: we are in many ways blind to our own familiar surroundings.

The lack of portraiture is also a conscious decision. What I am attempting to do here is, to a certain extent, breaking the mould and realizing that I can photograph anything I want, any way that I want – and trying to distance myself from the regular tourist gaze and creating my own way of seeing. For me personally, that means being respectful in the way that I understand it.



Is it inevitable for the caucasian tourist from the Western hemisphere to unwittingly carry the burden of power structures created by colonialism and imperialism? At the moment, the answer is yes. This is no attack towards a certain part of the world's population, nor is it an attempt to put blame on anyone or to try to segregate people according to geography or culture. Obviously nobody chooses where they are born, and it is neither constructive nor interesting to point fingers of blame on entire populations because of statistically privileged positions. But the fact remains that the notion of "we" that I have grown up with and become a part of refers to a chunk of the global population who are, in general, woefully ignorant about their privileges. It is not a human right to live in a way that relies on oppression and slavery. It is our privilege, not our right, to be able to travel easily, and with that privilege comes a responsibility to do this in an ethical way. It is a collective responsibility to take history, contemporary politics and markets into consideration – we are at a point where we can no longer ignore empires and the imperial context, as Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*. A shift away from the prevailing ideology that celebrates profit and consumption towards a thinking highlighting equality, knowledge and understanding is crucial if we are to work against the current problems of polarization.

Applying postcolonialism to photography is taking the general discourse deeper, to a very specific grassroots-level. Discussing how the shadows cast by imperialism occur in images of everyday life is something crucial: understanding how an image can be used as a tool to demote unfamiliar cultures to a lesser level and to isolate experiences from each others is a step towards

Postcolonialism can be provisionally defined as the perspective or worldview of those who believe that it is possible to understand today's world only by foregrounding the history of colonialism – defined in a very preliminary way as the domination of certain societies and peoples by others – over the past five centuries.

[The] domination of the West over the world in the realms of knowledge production and culture, or Eurocentrism, is an enduring legacy of colonialism.

Krishna, Sankaran (2009) Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-First Century

preventing this from happening.

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I first went to India in December 2010. I had no specific interest in yoga, westernized hinduism, spirituality or bhang lassi, and had very few expectations in general. On one hand India, though almost on the other side of the world, felt more familiar than most other non-Western countries – and yet I knew quite little about it. My perception of India was overwhelmingly visual, with colors and cows and people and temples appearing in my mind instinctively at the mention of the mere name “India”.

I knew what was the reason behind my strong mental image of the Indian subcontinent: growing up in the age of photography and having spent my formative childhood- and teenage years reading books, newspapers and magazines like National Geographic. I could source a lot of my mental pictures to specific books, like Steve McCurry’s *Portraits*¹ (a birthday gift from my mother to my father when I was ten or eleven) or Anabel and Barnabas Kindersley’s *Children Just Like Me* and *Celebrations*!², both published for UNICEF. These three books were exciting doors to new worlds, devoured again and again and again, and looking at them in retrospect I would pronounce them good and respectful introductions to foreign cultures. And yet from somewhere all those stereotypical India-related images and clichés seeped into my mind, despite me being

born in a world with few colonies left, over forty years after the British left India and almost thirty years after France left Algeria, Chad, Benin, Niger, Senegal, Madagascar and Mali (to name a few of the modern African countries colonized by the country with the motto of “liberté, égalité, fraternité”).

Modern India was born in 1947 when Britain left the British Raj and the subcontinent was partitioned, creating the new and separate state of Pakistan from the muslim-majority areas in west and east³ (although in truth, parts of India were still under European rule for over a decade, with Goa being annexed from the Portuguese by force as late as 1961). Today, India has twice as many inhabitants as Europe, and geographically consists of a third of it’s size. Of its twentyeight states (and seven union territories), the eight most afflicted with acute poverty together have more poor people than the twentysix poorest African nations combined⁴. On the other hand, India is placed fifth on the Forbes list of billionaires per nation, preceded only by USA, Russia, China and Germany.

Poverty can be difficult to define. What do we take into account – average wages? Cost of grains or urban costs of rent or a standardized food basket? The Gini coefficient or the Big Mac-index? When it comes to developing countries, we often make it easy and slash the meter off at two dollars – it’s easy to imagine that anybody surviving on less than that amount on a daily basis is living in poverty and squalor, despite the differences in costs of living that fluctuate from country to

¹ First published by Phaidon in 1999, it is still in print and a top seller for over a decade as well as a popular giftbook, due its consumer-friendly price of about 15 euros and hardcover binding.

² DK Books, 1995 and 1997

³ Bangladesh was initially a part of Pakistan, becoming independent in 1971 following a civil war.

⁴ According to a 2010 report by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), quoted in TheTimes of India online 10.7.2010

Graffiti in Bangalore, a few days after the rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey in Delhi, December 2012



CCTV on a hindu temple, Mumbai, January 2013



country. However, neither the two-dollar-line nor the sometimes used dollar-and-twentyfive-cents-line are global meters of poverty. In 2012, the Indian government reduced its amount of poor inhabitants quickly and efficiently, by lowering the poverty line from 965 to 859.6 rupees monthly in urban areas and from 781 to 672.8 in rural areas (quick calculation: the new poverty line runs at roughly 10 euros monthly, give or take a little – in other words annually only 100 euros or slightly above). This means living above an equivalence of 40 cents daily excludes a person from officially being poor by the standards of the Indian government – but in real life there are of course no magical lines that separate the “poor” from those supposed to be “scraping by just fine”. Looking at a chart over poverty in India, the deceptive illusion these artificial divisions create is illuminated: in 2010, 33% of Indians were reported to be living off sum below 1,25 US dollars daily – but adding a mere 75 cents to that sum so as to count in those living on 2 US dollars or less meant including 69% of the population⁵. Numbers like these are impossible to ignore, as are the statistics on malnourishment: 42% of Indian children under the age of five are underweight⁶.

For a tourist, taking in the cultural and climatical differences that exist within the united democracy that India officially is can be challenging. With 22 different languages listed as official in the Eight schedule to the Constitution, and a correspondingly large amount of different alphabets as well as the extreme differences in incomes and gaps between the social classes,

it is in no way strange that the first time visitor has a difficult time to create a uniform picture of India – especially without much prior knowledge or understanding.

As a grown up, I partly blame education for the infiltration of clichés and stereotypes into my mind. I never had abysmal teachers in school but on a nation-wide level, the geography lessons never presented the bigger picture and the Eurocentric worldview reigned. We learned facts but had no time to do more than scratch the surface: the majority of the African states became independent in the 20th century – but how did they end up “owned” by European states, anyway? The world was full of starving people – but why did that only happen to the others and not us in Finland even though we too lived in unhostile environment annually covered with ice for months?

Without any tools or knowledge to handle the often flawed and one-sided media reporting, the over-simplified images of so-called developing countries⁷ and non-Western societies are hard to tackle.

Misinformation and simplification can exist on very concrete levels, even encompassing seemingly obvious things like terms used widely in everyday life. Take the poverty-related word “slum”, for instance. Just the concept “slum” – one that is familiar to most people – is full of misconceptions, which is ironic as over one billion people live in

⁵ Interactive chart generated by the statistics-collecting non-profit organization gapminder.org – statistics on poverty in India from 2010

⁶ The HUNGaMA Survey Report (2011)

⁷ Clear distinctions between “developing” and “developed” are increasingly hard to make, the terms thus being rendered obsolete – the gapminder.org chart *Stop call them “developing countries”* illustrating the development in fertility and life expectancy on a global scale shows a clear argument for the retiring of the terms.

slum areas worldwide, about a seventh of the total human population of the planet.

The widely spread mental image of slums is that they are hellholes without any structure, organization or hygiene – a place where anybody can come and live and where no system exists: a wild mess with a prevailing “survival of the fittest”-mentality. Slums are indeed characterized by negative attributes: substandard housing, squalor and extreme lack of access to toilets, sanitation and water⁸. But despite the overwhelmingly negatives traits overshadowing slum living, there is more to the the slums than just dirt and mess – Mumbai’s famous Dharavi being a good example of this. In a city where the rents are among the highest in the world, Dharavi provides a cheaper alternative for those who are able to provide it for themselves and their families. A big step up from pavement dwelling, the miniature city-within-a-city does not come for free, with many people’s monthly makings not being enough to cover the rent. Furthermore, Dharavi is crowded, with 600,000 to 1 million people approximated to inhabit the 1.7 km² large space that it takes up – even in the slum, there isn’t enough space for everyone. Last but not least, the area has thousands of businesses and single-room factories, and the total annual turnover is estimated at hundreds of millions of US dollars.

Another example of simplification or generalization is the term *Bollywood*. It has spread far and wide and hardly needs any introduction. Usually incorrectly used as a general name for the entire Indian film industry, the name refers to Bombay,

since 1996 named Mumbai. Other areas have their own specific industries – for instance Kollywood (Tamil language cinema) and Tollywood (Telugu language cinema) are names frequently popping used when discussing Indian cinema, whereas some industries are merely referred to according to their language and/ or geographical location, like Punjabi cinema or Gujarati cinema.

Applying names to Indian cinema that strongly allude to the American Hollywood is of course not unproblematic, and can sound both patronizing and downplaying. The Indian film industry is not about blatantly copying the West, as the names can imply, but are rather a completely own kind of storytelling, developed more or less independently, sprung from a rich cultural tradition.

In direct contradiction to this, Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), probably the internationally most famous Indian film director, made his big break with his debut, the *Apu Trilogy* (1955-1959), which includes nothing of the “stereotypical Indian cinema” such as larger-than-life musical numbers or super famous actors and actresses. The trilogy’s first film, *Pather Panchali*, achieved great success after it was released, and went on to be screened at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival. Despite being a film that was fundamentally inspired by Ray’s experience of watching European cinema during a stint in London in the early 1950’s, it ironically enough did not tickle everybody’s fancy at its initial release. According to legend, François Truffaut left the Cannes screening of the film saying he didn’t “want to see a movie of peasants eating with their hands”⁹, clearly voicing power structures undulating under the surface of Eurocentric

⁸ UN-HABITAT: The Challenge of Slums – Global Reports on Human Settlements 2003, p. 12

⁹ Mentioned in several different media without any reliable source – The Telegraph, Calcutta, 20.4.2005 and The Hindu, 30.4.2011

thinking. Based on the short sentence, it is clear who's experience and life is considered valuable and who's is not. Some of Ray's fellow countrymen weren't too excited either: Nargis Dutt, an Indian member of Parliament, accused Ray of "exporting poverty"¹⁰ and spreading a negative image of his homecountry in Europe.

Despite Truffaut expressing his disinterest in Indian peasants, it is still in the 21st century the visual image of India as a half-primitive place that prevails in the Western consciousness. A search on the popular photo-sharing site Flickr for pictures tagged with "India" results in a wide selection of distinctively backwardglancing pictures that show a kind of sentimentality for a time, society or culture which the Western photographer has never experienced. The India that emerges from tourist photographs is poor and rural, but always colorful and idyllic. The old men are weathered but wise, the street children are tattered but happy and heavy labour is aesthetic and honest. In other words it is a colonial paradise where the visitor can find comfort in always being better (off) than the Other while letting the picturesque environment seep in.

From my two trips to India, some of the memories that have stuck most stubbornly to my mind are short moments of observing fellow tourists photographing – and being observed myself.

The young woman sitting outside Mumbai's main train station – the palace-like British-built Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus – with a baby in her lap, her entire posture submissive and an outstretched arm following the passers by –

and a tourist stopping to photograph her, without permission, the camera's long lens sternly pointing towards her agonised face while the shutter clicks away with its austere sound.

The middleaged caucasian man with the Rolleiflex hanging from a strap around his neck, peering through the camera's waistlevel finder at a group of older, skinny Indian men carrying 100 kilo sacks of rice on their backs, taking a photo and proceeding further along the street with a slight smile on his face.

Myself in Fort, Mumbai, staring at a dry stick peeking out through the pavement with a dry garland of flowers hanging from it, trying to decide how to best photograph it – and an old Indian man walking past, turning his head and staring in disbelief bordering to disgust at what it is I am devoting all my attention to.

John Urry's tourist gaze, as described in his eponymous book, is inextricably linked and extended to the camera, and the gaze is manifested in the ritual of photography. Already in the 1970's, Susan Sontag wrote about the tourist's necessity to produce photos as "indisputable evidence" that the trip was made, using photography as a principal device for experiencing something¹¹. In the age of digital photography and –manipulation, people are perhaps more weary of using a phrase like "indisputable evidence" in connection to photography, but the significance of photography as a device for experiencing is something constantly growing as people are traveling and photographing more than ever before in history.

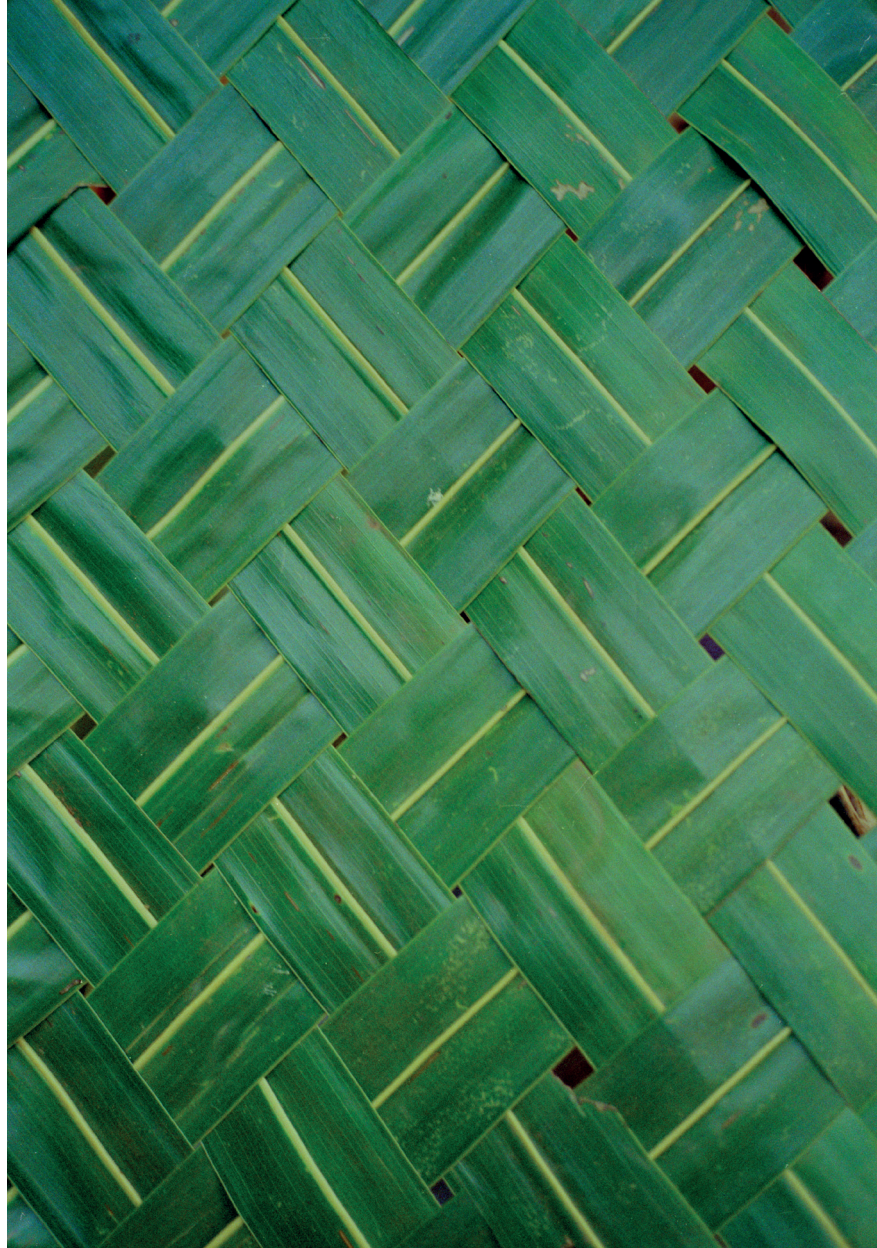
As the distinction between cameras and mobile phones is growing fainter, more and

¹⁰ Robinson, Andrew (2003), Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye – The Biography of a Master Film-Maker, p. 327-328

¹¹ Sontag, Susan (1977) On Photography, 1977, p. 9



Nimbu Mirchi-charm on scooter to help repel the evil eye, Mumbai, 2013
Next page: Woven coconut leaf, Gokarna, 2013



more people find themselves in the position of amateur photographer. One does not anymore need to make a conscious choice of investing in a camera, because nowadays the camera often slyly finds its way into one's life, increasingly with the possibility of instant publication and sharing of photos through built in possibilities to internet access¹². India's emerging market sees continuous annual increases in mobile phone sales, and technology in general is not anymore something exclusively restricted to the privileged – even though the dark side of technology – including sweatshops and hazardous waste – are being seen as the Other's responsibility and though different statussymbols are manufactured and advertised to different social classes (all in the name of maximum profit).

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I was around 17 when I properly heard about colonial genocide for the first time and picked up the term "postcolonial" from an extracurricular summer course. The latter seemed like something completely unnecessary to me back then. The former, however, was a terrifying surprise for someone who had grown up with an abundance of information on the second world war but with very little information on anything going on outside of the Western cultural hemisphere. To put it simply – I was pretty ignorant about something that had played an enormous part in history and shaped the entire world as Europe established itself as a self-proclaimed world leader over the course of

centuries.

It's embarrassing to out one's own cluelessness, but at the same time, I am outing the collective cluelessness of my generation. I am not an exception to the rule, rather an example of a regular student in a country that consistently scores high in the PISA tests. If I am such a late bloomer when it comes to knowledge about colonialism and postcolonialism, then what is the general situation with students in the Western countries?

In developing the colonial grip and constructing the imperial self in India during the 19th century, the British partly worked through architecture, deliberately mixing architectural styles associated with power when developing a colonial style now known as Indo-Saracenic and carefully transforming the urban landscape¹³. British photography in India was however not as closely linked to systematically planned domination. Photography was first used in India in 1840, but was from the very beginning linked to private practice – that of portraits studios, aspirants and amateurs – before it was appropriated and adopted into the colonial apparatus about 20 years later¹⁴, after the 1857 rebellion which led to the dissolution of the ruling East India Company and the subcontinent becoming an official colony governed under the British crown. Europeans often arrived privately, without governmental commissions, to record ancient ruins and places or to conduct "scientific" research through anthropologic photographic practices. India eventually evolved into one of the foremost international geographical

¹² According to a report published by research firm Strategy Analytics in March 2011, worldwide camera phone sales would exceed 1 billion during that year alone.

¹³ Dehejia, Vidya (1997) *Indian Art*, p. 380

¹⁴ Pinney, Christopher (1997) *Camera Indica – The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, p. 17

locations for documentary photographers to travel to (excluding, of course, places of war and unrest) during the 20th century, thanks to the centuries of exotization. Henri Cartier-Bresson went to India, Mary Ellen Mark went to India, Steve McCurry went (and goes) to India... India became, and has remained, a place to privately colonize and visually map when striding on the path towards becoming a famous documentary photographer.

In the 21st century, charter tourism has changed from being operated within a continent to increasingly focusing on far-distance traveling – people now crave exoticism and a touch of “authenticity” besides sea and sun. Previously colonized nations are nowadays often countries with objectified and exoticized cultures, people and locations and simultaneously popular tourist destinations¹⁵. And so, upon writing in “my trip to” in Google image search, India is one of the top suggestions that the search engine makes – for me, “my trip to India” came second, only after New York.

Going to India in 2010, I was in no way even remotely unique in my travel plans, no matter how averse my attitude towards the traditional hippie trail was or how limited my expectations were. As a twenty-something backpacker tourist traveling primarily in South India together with a companion it is probably safe to say I was living out a cliché¹⁶. The kiss of death for individuality

¹⁵ Hall, C. Michael and Tucker, Hazel (2004) *Tourism and Postcolonialism* Contested discourses, identities and representations, p. 12 – quoted in Kacz, Veronika (2009) *Indien som Sveriges motbild – En postkolonial studie om svenska backpackers föreställningar om Indien*, p. 16

¹⁶ In 2011, the seven industrialized countries (six of them European or North American) located amongst the top ten source countries for foreign

was buying the Lonely Planet guide book to South India, which, despite being an obvious culprit in the creation and maintenance of homogenic tourism, provided a kind of safety blanket for the nervous tourist that I was. However, embedded within all the information on health, hotels and transport was also the first seed that sprouted a slight feeling of hard-to-place discomfort in my mind consisting of a few words mentioned in passing in the *South India Highlights*-top ten list opening the guide book. Comprised of tips from other “travellers”, presumably put together by the book’s editors from vast amounts of reader submissions, one of the places mentioned was advertised thus: “The beaches here are all shady palm fringing, soft white sand, lovely little lagoons dotted with fishing boats, water at just the right temperature, *village women doing something scenic* in the distance... divine. (emphasis added)”¹⁷.

Who were these village women? What were they doing and in what way was it scenic? And above all – what was the tipster’s relationship to these people?

These are of course all more or less rhetorical questions. It isn’t difficult to imagine the scene painted up by the single sentence hyping the beach in question (which in this case is Kannur in the state of Kerala) – a quiet and serene place with nature close by and native women doing “their thing” in a rice field or outside their house. Close enough to feel present, but simultaneously

tourist arrivals in India alone accounted for 46,37% of visits – it is thus more or less safe to assume that more than 50% of the tourists visiting India are from industrialized countries located in the Western hemisphere. Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (2012) *India Tourism Statistics at a Glance 2011*

¹⁷ Singh, Sarina et al. (2009) *The Lonely Planet Guide to South India* (5th edition), p. 8

far enough to not pose a threat to the tourist's experience of "peace?"

Is it wrong to jump to the conclusion that the "scenic," unnamed things that the women were doing was labour? Clearly, the writer didn't see any point in clarifying what this "something" was, or even of giving the impression that they knew what the women were doing. The village women were reduced to decorations in the tourist horizon, props in the attempt to reach the perfect travel experience.

Labour is "scenic" to the tourist from an industrialized country who is only used to seeing working people in old, retro photographs. An unfamiliar place's distinctive visual backdrop also forms a scene on which familiar tasks or activities become extraordinary, making something like household work "scenic"¹⁸. Observing tourists in India and their photography underlines this hypothesis; beggars and hard labourers are popular subjects for snapshots, as are women performing duties like sweeping, laundering or merely carrying things. Dean MacCannell says all tourists embody a quest for authenticity¹⁹ and John Urry discusses this further, writing that tourists show particular fascination in "real lives":

"Almost any sort of work, even the backbreaking toil of the Welsh miner or the unenviable work of those employed in the Parisian sewer, can be the object of the tourist gaze."²⁰ Channeling the tourist gaze through the camera also means being able to distance oneself from an

unpleasant reality. The camera becomes a shield, the viewfinder a window to peer through. Cropping out the unwanted is suddenly more than okay – it becomes one's duty.

A strong incentive for me when buying flight tickets to India for the first time was, admittedly, the prospect of visiting a new country in the role of a photographer. Knowing I am not a bonfide street photographer or comfortable with taking pictures of unknown people without any initial contact and communication, I was extremely nervous before leaving for India. I half expected myself to go nuts when encountering the new country and culture, and to immediately attempt to badly reproduce work I had previously seen and liked. I imagined myself not being able to resist the urge to fall into an established way of shooting and ignoring any possibility to even try to develop the slightest version of own tourist gaze. I was so weary about having preconceptions and my mind filled with clichés that I made a conscious decision to try my best not to let visual prejudice become a pair of invisible glasses in front of my eyes. And anyways, who was I to try to define my narrow experience of an enormous country by taking pictures of unknown people, just because I had learned that that was the way in which to proceed in India? I decided to try to map my subjective experiences by forcing myself rather than anybody else to pose in photos for my camera, and so the first pictures I took after arriving in Mumbai were self-portraits.

The shock was unbelievable coming from Finland. Warm air and burgundy-colored carpets and a faint moldy smell of perpetual dampness and endless queues to reach the immigration desk at the airport and a taxi-ride through the

¹⁸ Urry, John (2002) *The Tourist Gaze* (second edition), p. 13

¹⁹ MacCannell, Dean (1999) *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (third edition), quoted in *ibid*, p. 9

²⁰ *ibid*

awakening early morning-city without a common language or understanding about the destination. I reacted belatedly on all those admonitions I had gotten before leaving – from my family, from acquaintances, from the dentist who drilled my teeth – and felt a wave of panic wash over me from out of nowhere. Cold sweat breaking out on my forehead, chills taking control over my body, vomiting like a fountain and slipping into an unexplainable anguish in which there was neither space nor time. In other words: my first day in India was spent in the holds of a panic attack in the hotel room. Towards the evening, I was recovering and took my first self-portrait, weak and awkward, ashamed and angry. Over the course of the two-and-a-half month long trip, I took daily pictures, listing them all in my written diary so as to be able to retrospectively remember the date of capture for each of them as well as to build up a chronology and remember my moods and experiences.

The kind of urban street corner-photography with large wooden analog cameras that Christopher Penney describes in *Camera Indica* is no longer a usual sight in India. A booming economy and class-defying access to computers²¹ has contributed to a widespread interest in technology that has replaced film photography almost as fast as in a richer country like Finland.

Between my two visits to India, in 2010-2011

²¹ Computer- and internet-access in urban India are like in large parts of the Western hemisphere no longer something reserved for the upper classes or the affluent. Internet cafés are widely available at different price-ranges, and used both for surfing the net and for work or studies. In 2011 NYTimes interviewed the Dharavi-based widow Sylva Vanita Baskar, who lives in a single room in the slum with her four children, but has prioritized buying a computer to help her oldest son in his work. The New York Times Online, 28.12.2011

and 2012-2013, the availability of cheap 35mm color film dropped drastically. The first time I visited, 100 and 200 iso Kodak film packaged in English- and Hindi-covered bright yellow-and-red boxes, was relatively easy to find on the tourist trail. It wasn't cheap by Indian standards – a film with 36 exposures costing roughly 80 rupees – but it was something that was there, a part of the street view. Inflatable Ultramax-advertisements dangling above cashiers and film boxes stacked in vitrines beside Lifebuoy-soaps or digital memory cards, covered with the fine street dust that Indian sellers fight an eternal battle with as they hover over their products like hawks, arm raised and duster dancing over the things.

Film processing too was easy to find. Every city's obligatory Mahatma Gandhi Road had a choice of chilly air conditioned color laboratories, and even smaller places (provided they were bustling with tourists) had a film processing place, or at least contacts to one in a nearby town. Black and white film was however already completely phased out, my enquiries for it being met with amused incredulity – only in the camera galli (small area where shops specialized in cameras are concentrated) in Mumbai's Fort-district did the search yield results.

Two years later, analog photography has lost its relevance in India. Inhabitants have moved on to digital cameras, and so have the tourists. Sometimes during my visits to India, people seeing me photographing asked me to take their picture – which I always did – after which they would eagerly request the camera to be turned around, disappointed when the back turned out to be solid, without the immediate result viewable.

Instead, the camera giants have put

all their effort in competing for the Indian market – cardboard versions of the mega-stars Priyanka Chopra (holding a Nikon) and Deepika Padukone (holding a Canon) can be found all over the country, and in Bangalore, a shimmering enormous Nikon-sign illuminates the night from a rooftop close to MG Road. Tiny shiny pocket cameras and sophisticated camera phones are aggressively marketed on the import-television channels like VH1 that target well-off urban teens, with brands like Nokia sponsoring programmes and the likes of Sony infiltrating music videos with blatant product placements. It's a fast-growing market: domestic tourism had 850 million Indians traveling within their own country in 2011, with an annual growth rate of 14%²². And what does everybody want from their travels? Photos, of course.

Interaction between western tourists and domestic tourists can be (and often is) farce-like. In the once-quiet village of Gokarna – an important pilgrimage site – on the Konkan coast, temple visiting pilgrims and devout hindu worshippers meet half-naked neo-hippies with little respect for local customs and doughy sun worshippers, desperately trying to catch a tan on the beach. The contrast between these two opposite kinds of tourists is stark, and the camera often gets to act as the bridge between the two cultures, with unpleasant results.

Where the western tourist sees India according to own expectations and expresses their version of the country visually through the camera, the Indian tourist often does the same



Sunrise in Gokarna, 2013

when encountering Westerners. For many Indians, the Caucasian stands for something exotic and tantalizing just as the case is the other way around; the Western tourist is a symbol of the foreign "loose morals" with especially young women receiving unwanted attention and continuously being photographed without permission. This may seem a far step from the (sexual) harassment euphemistically named "eve teasing" that guide books to India warn about, but constitutes another way of using the camera as a tool in building power structures – in this case relating to gender and sexism rather than colonialistic roles though.

In other words, the interesting questions regarding ethics that one encounters in photography are never restricted to affecting just one single aspect. It is a two way street, with problems arising on many levels.

²² The Market Research Division of the Indian Ministry of Tourism (2012) India Tourism Statistics at a Glance

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In his 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said continues the postcolonial analysis and critique of Western culture already started in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* fifteen years previously. The title's "culture" chiefly refers to literature and the book's essays deal mainly with British writers of the 19th century, but Said's arguments can easily be applied to different fields.

When Said scathingly writes about the imperialistic worldview still encompassing both politics and literature in the post-colonial and post-cold war world, he does so in a way that almost invites contemporary photography to be included. Check your politics at the door before you enter culture²³, Said writes, referring to how the residue of classical European 19th- and 20th-century imperialism is still allowed to stick to culture and to "cast its shadow over our time."²⁴

In photography, this definitely holds true. Be it within documentary photography or fashion or something else entirely – people often refuse to take responsibility for what they photograph and how. But it's also not an easy thing to just check one's politics by the door, at least not when it comes to documentary photography, as we are all products of the society we live in. Continuous discussions on the ethics of photography have been going on for decades, a century almost, and every once in a while, a supposedly documentary picture makes news – not as an illustration but usually rather in a journalistic scandal brought on by staging, retouching or misleading information.

²³ Said, Edward (1993) *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xiv

²⁴ *ibid* p. 5

Roger Fenton's photos of the Crimean war (1855) – taken long before technique or equipment allowed mobile, fast photography – do not show the post-Guernica war photography of pain, action and suffering that we are used to through modern media and through books on 20th century photojournalism. But despite their still life-type execution and age, Fenton's photos are not free from controversy, especially when it comes to the most famous of his Crimean photos; *Valley of the Shadow of Death*. The opinion that the cannon balls littering the road cutting through the landscape that the image depicts were brought to the place and carefully arranged by Fenton himself or on his orders is often repeated²⁵, implying that war photography has, in some sense, been dishonest as long as it has existed.

Roughly 150 years after the Crimean war, the Lebanese photographer Adnan Hajj found himself in the midst of a photographic fiasco later named Reutersgate following the distribution of a painfully badly manipulated photo of smoke over Beirut during the 2006 Lebanon War. Hajj had clumsily utilized the Photoshop clone-stamp-tool to enlarge a billowing grey cloud of smoke over the city, something that his employer Reuters oversaw. In general, the public outrage and discussion following the outing of the photo on several blogs seemed to be as closely connected to the fact that

²⁵ I heard the claim for the first time during a lecture in photojournalism by Merja Salo in Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, autumn 2010. However, the origin of this view is unclear: in 2007, documentary film director Errol Morris started investigating the claim that Fenton would have staged the cannon balls. He traced the information to modern times – to the 21st century, to be precise – and wrote a trilogy of essays on the matter for New York Times.

the manipulation was so blatant as to the fact that the picture showed a lie.

Susan Sontag recounts a similar story in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, when she writes about Robert Doisneau's legendary 1950 photograph of a Parisian couple kissing and the furore at the revelation forty years later that the situation was set up and that the couple in the picture were aspiring actors posing²⁶. The average viewer values a photograph as a proof of something: of participation, happenstance, of truth. The tourist often wants to capture the "real life" of the Other, not only as a way to take part in a tourist ritual, but also as a way of defining one's own position in the world and as a way to create and sustain a feeling of participation. The tourist snapshot is a kind of trophy and a piece of visual proof of having taken part, it is a way to share an experience and a gaze. This gives an explanation to why stereotypes are maintained from one generation to the next, to why the Eiffel tower or the Niagara Falls or Taj Mahal lure tourist after tourist to reproduce the same image over and over again: not only does this action strengthen the feeling of experiencing something, it also is something people expect one to photograph and later to show as a souvenir. It is not enough for a tourist to buy a postcard on location, because the incentive for taking a photo is ultimately not the final image – which indeed often meets the fate of being discarded in a box or hidden away on a hard drive. In a place like India, where an inexperienced Western tourist inevitably faces culture shock, the camera distances the tourist from the sheer overload of the reality. John Tagg puts it rather more bluntly: "through that democratised form of

²⁶ Sontag, Susan (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 55

imperialism known as *tourism*, they [photographs] can exert a power to colonise new experiences and capture subjects across a range never envisaged in painting"²⁷.

John Urry argues²⁸ that the tourist gaze, a term here interchangeable with tourist photography, is chosen because of anticipation that is constructed and sustained through various media, ranging from magazines and literature to film and the internet. We have grown up on images of beggars and rural north-Indians in colorful clothes, on pictures of architectural temples and palaces, on photos of spectacular nature... and therefore those pictures symbolize India. According to Urry, the tourist gaze is constructed through signs²⁹ and in a certain sense the tourist is a semiotician, searching for symbols typical for places or people and perpetuating them, with the camera as a crucial tool. A google image search helps illustrate this: a search for Paris gave me a 100 % result for the Eiffel tower in the top ten, and a search for Mumbai yielded photos of the colonial monument Gateway of India in four photos out of the top ten.

In the age of internet and camera phones, the amateur photographer's influence is bigger than ever, as demonstrated by the rapid spread of news imagery today, and for example by the World Press Photo's jury's decision to award a still image from a video of the mob lynching of Muammar Gaddafi a special mention in 2012³⁰. Naturally,

²⁷ Tagg, John (1988) *The Burden of Representation – essays on photographs and histories*, p. 164

²⁸ Urry, John (2002) *The Tourist Gaze* (second edition), p. 3

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ <http://www.bjp-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/news/2145356/world-press-photo-image-injured-muammar-gaddafi-receives->





Knife sharpening as a handicraft, Mumbai, 2013

this also goes for tourist photography, which is now more than ever something for an audience; something to be shared on sites like facebook or flickr. Thus the images become part of the image flow which constructs our tourist gaze, the photos help upkeep the gaze they themselves are born out of.

In his essay *Picturing Others*, Walter Moser agrees that images influence and control the way in which the West perceives remote societies and cultures³¹ and that it defines a priori expectations on the part of the observer. However, he follows up the pessimism (or should I say realism) with an extremely important point that is crucial to remember when discussing photography and ethics, namely that "images can not only confirm expectations, they can also critically question and broaden determined notions".

There is no doubt that the fact that we live in a world of images is, in many (if not most) ways, an overwhelmingly positive thing. After all, there is some truth in the clichéd saying that one image says more than a thousand words. For better or for worse, photography visually educates us, exposes unfamiliar practices and comments on actualities. The trouble is just that we often as individuals lack the tools for tackling the stereotypes conveyed through photography or turn the blind eye to the control that images exert over societies.

The discussion about the ethics of photography has traditionally been concentrated on truth versus lie (as demonstrated by the example of Doisneau's kissers previously mentioned), but naturally the aspect of exploitation hasn't been left unexplored. This

part has mostly been reduced to covering ethical problems of photography within a certain culture or nation, or – perhaps most frequently – with portraying sexuality. A postcolonial investigation of photography lags far behind, with talks on documentary photos' (be it professional or amateur) ethical dilemmas seldom including the photographer's position or projections of power, frequently leaving history out all together.

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The German photographer Hans Silvester's roughly 200-page long book *Desert Eves – An Indian Paradise* solves the problem of taking on too much of India by concentrating on one single village located in the Thar desert of north Indian Rajasthan. Silvester's strength lies in the fact that he submerges himself in the different aspects of the village life, giving an impression of having spent actual time interacting with the people he photographs (something confirmed in the preface), and coming off as respectful and gracious. The same can also be observed in Silvester's most famous series; that on the natural decorations worn by the people of the Surma and Mursi tribes of the Omo valley in Ethiopia.

As the name *Desert Eves – An Indian Paradise* implies (perhaps unnecessarily much so) Silvester's view of his Rajasthani village is that of a rural utopia, but despite showing the harsh desert as peaceful, he includes plenty of images of labour (which, presented in a clear context, is completely justified) and hints towards the difficulties of drought. What is remarkable is also how little information on social class or income the photos convey. No focus is put on poverty, or maybe – to

special-mention retrieved 21.2.2013

31 Brandner, Vera et al. (2012) *Picturing Others: Context*, p. 8

put it in a different way – Silvester aestheticizes the poverty and the “primitive” living conditions until they are reduced to paradise-like simplicity and eventually seize to exist.

What redeems Silvester’s series and puts it apart is the demystifying way in which he has portrayed the people, mainly the women. At work, the women are protected from the burning sun and the fine sand by trailing veils, covering their heads and faces and, for the Western viewer, adding a distinct mystery. In the close-up portraits Silvester is however decidedly un-mystifying, photographing his subjects in a way reminiscent of somebody photographing close friends. He largely ignores documentary photography’s prevailing norms of seriousness and stern gazes that work towards hiding the Indian woman’s experience and that create the image of a human speaking a different emotional and expressive language than “us”. In Silvester’s photos the women’s and girl’s expressions are open and mischievous; they often laugh out loud and seem comfortable with being in front of the camera³².

The book’s blurb rather creepily claims that in the Thar all women are “beautiful, all Eve”³³. There is no need to dwell longer on this deeply troubling and clichéd sentiment, which not only suggests that a woman’s (especially an “exotic” woman’s) most intriguing feature is the amount of her beauty, but also defines the Other through

³² Silvester, Hans (2001) *Desert Eves – An Indian Paradise*, p. 195, 208-11, 221, 225

³³ This view is actually taken from the essay by Catherine Clément opening the book. Among the many good points Clément makes, she also paints a lot of artistically high-flying pictures of rural India as some kind of visualization of the Bible (“here, in the middle of the Hindu desert is the Bible”, p. 9, etc). For me this is quite awkward reading.

a Christian term. This kind of semi-patronizing phrasing is a culprit in exoticizing and simplifying tribes and rural poverty. One can only be happy that the beauty Silvester’s photos show does not exclude culture, individuality and attitude. On the other hand, the term “beauty” is often used in a much wider extent when gazing on something unfamiliar. It is common courtesy as a tourist to graciously proclaim anything one considers being in an unfortunate position – from poor children to crumbling buildings – as being “beautiful”, thus subconsciously giving it a kind of blessing and extending it the right to co-exist. On the other hand, the unfamiliar also gives us a possibility to see more actively and curiously than we do in familiar circumstances, temporarily opening our eyes to a bigger variety of “beauty”.

The black and white square format portraits of Vera Brandner’s, published in the monograph *Picturing Others*, create a stark contrast to Silvester’s *Desert Eves* – starting from the simple fact that Brandner’s book doesn’t include photos from India. Brandner’s work isn’t geographically limited, and the photos show people from various countries ranging from Angola to Pakistan; places unfamiliar to the average Western reader. These are also places that few people would think of visiting as tourists (excluding, perhaps, Israel), as all of them are plagued by conflict and described in Western media as places of unrest.

From the title of the work to the booklet of accompanying essays with a postcolonial point of view, *Picturing Others* is a work that acknowledges the possible problems and the underlying powerstructures at work when photographing the Other. Brandner’s photographic process

includes asking every person she photographs for permission to take their picture, giving them a choice and the option to consciously choose what attitude to adopt when facing the camera. None of the photos are snapshots in the sense that they would capture anybody sneakily, stealing their likeness for personal artistic gain or for aesthetic purposes. In many photos, the camera's positive connotations are clearly exposed, with curious people happily cramming themselves into the frame, excited about being seen and about the attention. The pictures expose the many different reactions people have to a camera, showing eyes that are dejected, suspicious, curious or proud, to name just a few. Brandner's photos symbolize how multi-faceted the reception of a camera is, and how power structures are always present between subject and photographer, as well as between subject and viewer. Every photo of Brandner's shows some kind of emotion and attitude, there are no neutral portraits. In the context of the book, along with the essays, Brandner's work highlights different aspects of picturing others, and symbolizes an entire genre. Such is the nature of the photograph that its content is always in dialogue with the context it is put in – what might work in a photo book, as a part of a series with a foreword or accompanying essay might not work on it's own when posted separately on a social media site.

One of my personal favourites when it comes to documentary photos of India is without a doubt Raghubir Singh (1942-1999). Working within a similar aesthetic field as Martin Parr, his photos often have some twist, be it in composition, colors or content. They are set apart by their

unsentimental grip – the images are full of modernities and visual humor, and some of them are lighted by flash in a distinctively un-natural way. A statue of the nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose on a bustling Kolkata street is framed in the window of a vehicle's open door and praying bathers in Benares are photographed from the vantage point of a big Nandi bull-statue, its stone head and chipped ears taking up a third of the image's area.

Singh's photos cover all of India, from north to south and from east to west. The chaos often underlined in photos of India is regularly present in Singh's work, but not in the incomprehensible and creepy way that one usually encounters. Through Singh's viewpoint, the chaos is the result of a country in constant flux – there is direction and energy rather than just a big hoard without a will. Take for example a 1989 photo of Singh's from the hindu Kumbh Mela-pilgrimage³⁴, the largest gathering of people on the planet, as well as a happening that attracts thousands of photographers from all over the world. In Western media, the imagery published from the Kumbh promotes a sense of claustrophobia, primitivity and mysticism with hints of a patronizing sneer at the naivety of people believing in something like a hindu worldview. Contrastingly, in Singh's photo, the religious experience plays the main role, rather than the "weirdness" or the nudity of the sadhus pictured. Encompassed in a thick cloud of orange dust, the sadhus are shown in motion, walking in a neat line, with a clear sense of direction. There is no posing, no eye contact with the lens, just barely visible expressions. Kumbh Mela isn't a

³⁴ Sadhus, Kumbh Mela, Prayag, Uttar Pradesh, 1989 – published in Singh, Raghubir (1999) *River of Colour*, p. 31

theatre happening for the cameras, but a deeply meaningful spiritual journey for millions of people.

Another interesting aspect in Singh's photography is the inclusion of the elusive middle and upper classes. Suddenly we get a peek into the power structures within the Indian society: we see the housekeepers in the luxury apartments and the parties of the rich and famous, the millionaire Pranolal Bhogilal and his young bejewelled daughter in front of a Spirit of Ecstasy Rolls Royce and a chauffeur in uniform and the maharaja Karni Singh showing off a camera in front of a palace. Often the fancy life is juxtaposed with the grimmer reality of the majority – in front of grotesquely shaped shiny cupboards, two crouched women (undoubtedly of a low caste) polish the perfect stone floor of a Gujarati palace, making themselves seem as small as possible.

The sometimes unconventional and unexpected compositions of Singh's photos vaguely bring Lee Friedlander to mind. Not a coincidence, perhaps, as Singh and Friedlander traveled India together, which Singh later would write about in negative terms, saying Friedlander's way of looking for beauty as seen in abjection was fundamentally Western and didn't suit him or India³⁵. A subjective opinion, for sure, but one that yet again exposes how deep the east/west dichotomy goes. For all the differences in worldview and culture, or as in this case, artistic approach, a big part of it seems to be artificial. But artificial or not, the dichotomy with all its dirty, ugly colonial remains cuts through and makes its way into every place possible. On being an Indian photographer, Singh writes:

"However gifted the Indian photographer might be, however personal or intimate his or her photographs, he or she will find it a quixotic quest to bond oneself to the Eurocentric Western canon of photography ..."

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I am not propagating for an end to the practice of travel photography, or any kind of restriction or censoring, nor do I want to introduce any kind of exclusion regarding who can and cannot use a camera. I don't want to live in a world of bland, shy photos. I embrace the fact that the two-dimensional surface of a photograph – any photograph – will always, no matter what, be value-laden, subjectively constructed, full of connotations. There is no way to take objectively or morally "good" pictures or to erase one's position in the world's enormous hierarchy, but there is the possibility of taking the concept of equality to a deeper level, of transforming it from something abstract regarding distant Others to something personal and something with a meaning. If equality is a human right, then perhaps we should try to enforce it on a grassroot-level. If the world of today is globalized, then perhaps we should take it upon ourselves to actually learn something about other cultures. What better way to start than with questioning and educating ourselves?

³⁵ Basu, Karna (2003) A Shot in Time, published in Seminar #524, April 2003

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